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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the issues in literacy that arose in Fiji in the 70s and the 80s, the social and contextual variables that shaped them, and the ways in which those issues were tackled. The paper also discusses some current developments that have occurred--some of these developments will have a positive benefit upon the literacy levels in the country but some may have an adverse effect. The paper contends that to better understand the literacy situation in Fiji, it is necessary to look at the historical roots of present day literacy. It presents a historical overview, concentrating on the role of Christian missionaries in promoting literacy and the role of the British government in establishing schools and setting curricula, with the emphasis on English. The paper also considers the urbanization of Fiji and modern economic development, along with the presence of television and other informational technologies, and discusses the South Pacific Literacy Project begun in the late 1980s and funded by the Australian government. Contains 22 references. (NKA)

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Literacy in Fiji: The Historical Roots of the Present Situation and the Likely Future Developments

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LITERACY IN FIJI: THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE LIKELY FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Francis Mangubhai

INTRODUCTION

Print literacy in Fiji has existed for just over 160 years and for a large part of that time it was very narrowly used, not unexpectedly for a culture that was oral-based prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. In this paper I wish to discuss some of the issues in literacy that arose in the 70's and 80's, the social and contextual variables that shaped them, and ways in which those issues were tackled. I will also discuss some current developments that have occurred. Some of these developments will have a positive benefit upon the literacy levels in the country but some may have an adverse effect. In order to better understand the literacy situation in Fiji, it is necessary to look at the historical roots of present day literacy.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LITERACY IN FIJI

Literacy in the South Pacific, particularly in the eastern part, has a common historical origin: the arrival of the Wesleyan missionaries. Fiji, regarded as the meeting place of Melanesia and Polynesia, saw the first missionaries in 1835. Their mission was to convert Fijians to Christianity and one of their major weapons towards this end was literacy. They were specifically charged to "draw up a comprehensive statement respecting the character of the language, and the difference between it and other Polynesian dialects, the principles on which you have settled its grammatical form, and the rules by which you have been guided in translating into it the word of God" (Cargill letters, 18 June 1839, quoted in Schutz, 1972, p.2). The first missionaries in fact arrived from the neighbouring island Kingdom of Tonga where Christianity and its concomitant literacy (in the Tongan language) had been introduced some few years earlier.

With the arrival of the missionaries in Fiji in 1835, formal schooling was introduced into a society where learning previously had been integrated into the everyday life of the people and where particular types of learning were the prerogative of particular groups within a tribe. One learned to become a fisherman by going fishing with the fishermen and learning from the actual practice of fishing. One learned to be a canoe builder by working with canoe builders. In short, traditional education was "practical, vocational and was concerned largely in maintaining the status quo" (Bole, 1972, p. 1). The initial

educational emphasis was on the teaching of reading in the Fijian language for which a Romanised alphabet had been devised, to which later some teaching of elementary numeracy was added. The prime focus remained the teaching of reading in order to read the Bible and other religious writing (see Mangubhai, 1984, 1994 for further details).

However, there was not just one variety of Fijian language throughout the group of islands, and as the missionaries spread to other major islands the economics of printing forced a choice of one of the Fijian languages (or communalects) as the main literary medium (Geraghty, 1984). The choice was most judicious on the part of the missionaries. The seat of the most powerful "state" at that time was the small island of Bau, so the Bauan dialect was chosen'. Moreover, this language was similar to the "Standard Fijian" which was the existing language of diplomacy. Hence the Bauan Language was "objectified"; the written form became a standard against which language could be judged as correct or incorrect. It became an objective yardstick.

This particular codification of a spoken language into a written form still has a powerful influence over the Fijian people with regard to what is acceptable or not acceptable in
print[2].

The Wesleyan Methodist Church, to which the first missionaries belonged, soon established village schools run by pastor-teachers who underwent a rudimentary form of teacher training. By the time Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874 and became a crown colony, reading was widespread enough for the first Governor of Fiji in 1874 to comment upon it. Over 50 years later, Mann (1935, p.13) was to say that due "almost entirely to the efforts of the missions, most adult Fijians can read and write their own language." For 50 years after Fiji had become a British crown colony the churches, Methodist and Catholic, the latter having arrived in Fiji a decade later than the former, continued to play a leading role in the education of the Fijian people.

'Geraghty (1984) has in fact argued that it was not quite the Bauan language but the missionaries chose to call it that, a tactical foresight that served their purpose well.

[2]In the early 1970s, for example, a collection of short stories written in a more colloquial Fijian was published, but it received a very cool reception from the leaders of opinion in the Fijian society because amongst other reasons it did not use the "literary" Fijian, the language of the Fijian Bible. Racule (personal communication, 1994), the Director of Curriculum Development Unit in the Ministry of Education, suggests that there is beginning to be a change in the type of language that is regarded as 'legitimate' in print, especially in books. The Fijian attitude is undergoing a change and more colloquial, modern Fijian is beginning to be acceptable in printed books and printed stories.

The Methodist Church emphasised the use of the Fijian language in their schools but the Catholic schools, as far back as the 1 890s, had begun to teach some English. The introduction of some English into the school curriculum, and the colonial government's policies after 1916 when it established a Department of Education, was to change the emphasis of language used in education settings dramatically in the 1900s.

By the middle of 1930s the Methodist Church had relinquished control of most of the elementary schools to the government. The use of Fijian as the medium of instruction at upper levels of the primary school thereafter became less widespread; a new policy was implemented whereby the medium of instruction for the first three years was to be the vernacular language, Fijian or Hindi, but thereafter to be replaced by English[3]. This ensured the predominance of English in the education system right to the present time, even after political independence in 1970.

The question I would like to turn to next is: what precise forms of literate behaviour were introduced into the Fijian society and why those and not others took root in t-hat society.

The Christian missionaries believed that conversion to Christianity should be sustained by converts reading sections of the bible that had beer; translated by them. When, for example, when the missionary Cross visited an island where two Tahitian teachers preaching Christianity were resident and found that they could not read or write in Fijian, he sent another teacher to the island so that people could be taught to read the scriptures that had been translated (Derrick, 1946). The missionaries, in fact, ran an incipient teacher training institution which trained Fijians to read and do some elementary writing and then go out to teach other villagers how to read the scriptures that had been translated and printed in Fijian.

A very basic form of literacy was introduced by the missionaries, largely to do with the reading of the scripture stories. There were very few reading materials apart from these stories. Writing skills were not developed to any extent and it seems that while many could read, few could write. Calvert (1858, p.258) described the training of teachers and youths by missionaries: they would "read a short theological lecture together and then make it the subject of conversation and inquiry" . This was likely to have been the orientation of the teaching programmes of the missionaries.

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[3]Such a policy was facilitated by the monoracial character of most of the elementary schools, a situation that has historic, political, sociological and geographical roots, and these largely separate school systems have continued to the present day.

Clammer (1976 p. 164) cites from the report of a commission appointed to investigate certain alleged errors in the 1880 census of the population: "We remember them [births and deaths], some of us by writing, but others do not write them down." And a quote from a scribe who kept returns of births and deaths in books: "There are some village teachers that cannot write. Those that cannot write use pieces of reed for the purpose of reckoning up the births and deaths that occur in their villages. They can read, although they cannot write" (emphasis added).

An interesting question that arises is why the Fijian people took to reading but not to writing. The answer, it seems, to lie in the way literacy operates in societies. While the range of literate behaviours may increase over time, the early literate behaviours that become part of a society have some congruence with behavioural patterns that already exist in the society. In other words, literacy serves initially to reinforce what already exists in the society and is part of the social behaviour of the group. Each Fijian village had its own gods, invisible superhuman powers that controlled or influenced all earthly things. These gods, however, were not represented as material objects. Most villages had their 'temple', the bure kalou (god-house), frequently built on raised foundations. The bete (the priest) was the link between the god and the supplicant on whose behalf the bete contacted a particular god.

Looking at the role of the bete in the Fijian society it can seen that a missionary could play a similar role vis-a-vis his god. In addition, the more advanced medical and hygiene knowledge would have assisted in procuring cures that might not have been possible through the agency of the bete. In such circumstances, the Fijian can be forgiven for thinking that the new god was more efficacious than their old ones. The 'new priest' did not have to go into a trance to communicate with gods; he simply used words printed on paper or words committed to memory but which could also be found on paper in order to communicate with his god. The functions of the two types of priests were the same even though their messages might be different. The modes of communication might be different but the critical factor in societal practices is function and not the mode, which is only the channel for communication. A similar situation is described by Kulick and Stroud (1993) who describe the literate behaviours they observed in a village in Papua New Guinea. The most prominent of these behaviours was related to Christianity. Unlike some other writers, Kulick and Stroud argue that the very link between Christianity and literacy arises out of the villagers' belief that Christianity is the key to obtaining the Cargo. As Kulick and Stroud put it

> the Cargo will materialise as a result of their actions; it is they themselves who can bring about the change. They are therefore always on the lookout for a 'road' which they can manipulate to obtain the money and the factories they want. And it is at this juncture that the villagers' literacy skills fit into their scheme of things. (P.40)

Traditionally, these Papua New Guinean villagers have regarded words as having power, be they part of a magic chant or the power imbued in a name. It was believed that certain words uttered in particular ways in certain contexts bring about desired outcomes. The Christian Word of God has been interpreted in the same manner with the difference that these words seem to link to a more powerful god who could also provide the devotees with material things like an outboard motor, aeroplane, money and so on. The fact that 'God's

talk' was to be found on paper and that anyone who could learn to decipher them could access them was a powerful reason to learn to read.

The other literate behaviour observed by Kulick and Stroud was the practice of writing notes to one another. The actual language that was used in writing these notes and the functions they performed were very much like oral requests that were made formally. These requests were heavily disguised so that there could be no loss of face if they were denied. In other words, the practices of their society as they existed were translated into the written medium, which presented another powerful means of distancing themselves from words when making requests. The new literacy reinforced their already existing patterns of behaviour.

Finally, given below is an example that seems to reinforce the view that writing was not as widespread as reading for reasons discussed above. Requests for assistance in the Fijian society, especially those made by one chief to another, occurred through the medium of a diplomat (a matanivanua) who presented the request orally. The minutes by Blythe to the Colonial Secretary in England register a complaint about a chief who sent a note requesting for assistance rather than sending the customary matanivanua. The practice of making requests through a letter was not socially acceptable and therefore a practice that would not be valued or encouraged.

> While he [a chief] might offend the qase [the older folks, those in traditional authority] in Natewa bay [sic] by sending for their youths to build houses for him at Somosomo by letter in the European fashion, not by word of the accredited matanivanua [diplomat] as etiquette dictated ... (Blythe to Colonial Secretary, 23 September, 1881, FCSO 81/1913, quoted in Scarr, 1980:96, emphases added)

The twentieth century introduced many changes. In urban areas there was some more material available in the vernacular but they would not have qualified as a 'print-rich environments'. In addition, after the Colonial

Government established a Department of Education in 1916, and the Colonial Civil Service required some local people with some knowledge of reading and writing in English, that more encouragement was given to schools to offer English also. This was done through a system of grants to those schools that complied with the request from the Department for English language teaching. This particular form of action was necessitated by the fact that the bulk of education in Fiji was being carried out by religious organisations and locally organised committees. By the time Fiji achieved its independence from Britain, English was firmly established in the school curricula and national examinations at various grade levels from Grade 6 were conducted in English.

The introduction of increasingly more English in the school curricula did not result in greater amounts of reading for informational or recreational purposes. Most schools had few books apart from the prescribed textbooks and, in some cases, even these were at a premium and had to be shared by students and were generally not allowed to be taken home. Reading for pleasure was not a part of socially approved activities for young or old. In fact, a young person in the village found reading for pleasure under a coconut tree was likely to be thought of as slothful and regarded as using the excuse of reading in order to avoid work, in the plantation for boys and in the house for girls. Reading religious tracts or the bible, on the other hand, did have social sanction and many a household would have bible reading in the evening.

In these circumstances, educators wondered about the level of literacy achievement in school. Announcements about the levels of literacy in Fiji tended to use the benchmark of four years of primary education as an indication of literacy. Anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest otherwise. A group of educators set out in 1977 to find out just how literate children were in the primary schools and conducted a national test of reading in the English language at Grade 6. Texts chosen were rated at a readability level lower than the textbooks used at Grade 6. The results showed that least 25% of the children could not read or were reading below chance level and many of these children were in the rural areas. (Elley and Mangubhai, 1979). When standardised tests of reading were developed for Grade 6 children, large scale trials of the tests produced the same proportion of students reading well below chance level on multiple-choice items (Elley and Achal, 1979).

The 1977 survey led to a project called Book Flood Project in which rural schools were provided with high interest, well-illustrated story books for children to read during their classtime in the English lesson. The research project used a design in which there was a matched control group and used the pre- and posttest design. The children in the experimental group outperformed the control group in all measures that were used at the end of the second year (for more information, see Elley and Mangubhai, 1983). Talks

and discussions with the Ministry officials raised consciousness that reading was more than just "barking at the print" and that in order to develop comprehension abilities children needed to be provided with reading materials other than their textbooks.

The consciousness-raising about the importance of the act of reading, and reading frequently, that occurred during the 80s also highlighted another issue. If children learned to read initially in the vernacular, as they did in most cases, then they needed reading materials in the vernacular also and not have to wait until later grades when English was more firmly established to practise their reading skills. However, there were few vernacular stories in print suitable for children at early stages of literacy development. A number of issues were foregrounded as a result of this line of enquiry: (1) there had hitherto been no encouragement for anyone to write in vernacular for children; (2) local people had not been encouraged to write for children (or for anyone else, for that matter) and therefore did not have the confidence to do so; (3) established publishers found the market too small and wanted government subsidies before they would publication of reading material in the vernacular; (4) the Government Curriculum Development Unit had not considered the production of reading materials for leisure or informational purposes but had instead concentrated on writing textbooks based on local curricula for use in schools.

The Institute of Education at the University of South Pacific took a leading role in trying to change the climate of thinking about books and reading in Fiji and in other South Pacific Island countries which the University served. A number of strategies were suggested, some of which were taken up by some countries or by particular teachers in countries who had come in contact with the personnel in the Institute. One strategy that could provide some reading material in a very short time-frame was the production of handcrafted books of stories. Teachers were encouraged to write down the oral stories in their culture and illustrate them or have them illustrated by students in school. They followed the format of commercially available story books in English but instead of type print, they were handwritten and hand illustrated. These stories written by teachers and other adults (and primary class pupils were also encouraged to write) were to become the reading matter for primary schools. The strategy had the added advantage of getting into print oral stories with which children were already familiar. With hindsight, it seems that this strategy was more likely to succeed in a smaller school system.

Another strategy that was suggested was the translation of some of the more popular western children's stories. Publishers of these stories could then be approached to see whether they would run a small print with the same illustrations with the English text replaced by the vernacular.

By mid 1980s it was clear that technological possibilities associated with the computer offered the best hope of producing locally written stories in the vernacular in some quantity. While they may not have colour as the commercially produced books in English did, they provided reading materials in the vernacular languages that was needed in classrooms so that children could better develop their reading skills. (With scanning possibilities now more widespread and the cost of colour printers more affordable, the locally produced books can be made quite attractive.)

During the 1980s with the help of the Regional UNESCO office in Western Samoa and the coordination provided through the Institute of Education at the University of South Pacific Fiji, as well as other South Pacific countries, some local stories in the vernacular were produced. By the end of 80s, Fiji decided to put in more resources for the development of vernacular readers and has now produced many readers in Fijian as well as some in Hindi. These have been printed using a computer and laser printer and have been illustrated by local artists. With the availability of colour printing, the next generation of books that are produced may even have colour.

Production of appropriate stories in the vernacular is only the first step towards providing children with a richer literacy environment. Schools in rural areas need to provide the opportunity and encouragement for children to develop reading habits that are exercised both for the purposes of relaxation and for satisfying informational needs. A culture of reading that is developed within the school culture may seep into the outside culture of the village so that a much greater range of materials are read for a variety of purposes, all socially approved. A cultural change of this sort is occurring in the more professional homes of urban dwellers currently but has not reached the rural areas in any substantial way for a variety of reasons, not an inconsequential one being there is generally little disposable income in the rural areas and no bookshops.

Another initiative to try to inculcate the value of reading by teaching reading more efficiently was the South Pacific Literacy Project begun in late 1980s. This was a joint project of the Institute of Education at the University of South Pacific, the Australian Literacy Educators Association, the New Zealand Reading Association and the Oceania Subcommittee of the International Reading Association. The project, funded by the Australian government, aimed to increase the knowledge about literacy of key literacy workers in Fiji and other South Pacific countries by developing a literacy course aimed at Pacific islands. An associated goal was to set up a network of key trained literacy workers, who would run courses for primary teachers to enhance their understanding of the nature and importance of literacy and to relate this understanding to the development of literacy programmes which cater for different language needs of students. The trial of this course proved successful and was evaluated by an outside team which presented a report on their

findings (Walker and Elley, 1991). This project was subsequently incorporated into an UNDP-UNESCO-UNICEF-AusAid Basic Education and Life Skills (BELS) Programme, executed by the Institute of Education at USP. Amongst the subprogrammes of this Project is one entitled Primary and Literacy Education (PALE) which has incorporated elements of the South Pacific Literacy Education Course. These developments funded through till 2001 will impact upon the development of better literacy teaching methods and a more positive attitude towards reading amongst the students.

The process of change also has to occur with teachers so that they can become role models for students. Currently many teachers do not do much reading or show any overt evidence of enjoyment in reading, a situation that is not unusual in other countries with similar histories (see, for example, Etim (1990) for comments about Nigerian teachers). To transform students into readers one needs to transform teachers first, a goal that needs to be addressed seriously in the teacher training institutions more deliberately. The immediate future of the development of habits of reading for pleasure or seeking information appears to have been forestalled by a new technology that has made its appearance in Fiji, the introduction of television.

THE INTRODUCTION OF TV

Unlike developed countries where television was introduced first and the more widespread use of videos followed, the development in the South Pacific was in reverse: videos have been in use since the late 70s (Plange, 1993) and are a very marked feature of urban life. Lack of electricity and video outlets in the rural areas has ensured that this remained largely an urban phenomenon.

Currently, as it happened in other parts of the world, television is broadcast from late afternoon to early evening during the weekdays and from mid-day during the weekends (Lotherington-Woloszyn, 1995a). Apart from the local news which is controlled by the government, the programs are the normal fare on New Zealand television. In a survey conducted in the urban and peri-urban area in Fiji, Lotherington-Woloszyn (1995b,) found that the seven most favourite programs were the Fiji National News, Shortland Street, ITN World News, followed by Sesame Street, Lois and C/ark, The Commish, and Fresh Prince of Bel Air. A large part of the surveyed population was watching between one half and two hours of television, with about 14 per cent watching three or more hours.

Already there have been concerns expressed about the content of the programs which is foreign to the culture of the islands (PIM, December, 1994). There is a concern that this powerful medium will have a marked impact on the lifestyles of the people. As one government official in the same issue of Pacific Islands Monthly pointed out, advertisements on TV were sending the

wrong messages to rural people, the portrayal of urban lifestyles to be desired and emulated.

While concerns have been voiced regarding the foreignness of many of the values portrayed on the television, many of which, incidentally, are also portrayed on videos that have hitherto and continue to be rented, relatively little has been said about the likely effect of more widespread TV on literacy. Lotherington-Woloszyn (1995a), while pointing out the foreignness of the content of Sesame Street, says that TV appears to be frequently used as a baby-sitter for young children. She suggests that there may be some positive effects in terms of exposure to the standard English language (UK and USA varieties) though, she claims, it is too soon to say what they will be. To try to gauge the possible effects of the introduction of TV into the South Pacific, it is necessary to turn to research that has been conducted in those countries where TV has been extant for many years now.

Neuman (1991) summarises four major putative effects of television:

1. TV takes away time from other activities, especially reading (displacement).

2. TV has influenced the way people learn.

3. TV affects school related behaviors, in that, students become accustomed to short-term gratification.

4. TV stimulates interest.

Of these four effects, only the first one will be discussed in this paper.

Neuman (1991) evaluates research related to the first claimed effect and finds that displacement does occur but it occurs with those items that cannot compete with the television. Cartoons, for example, replace comic reading but do not replace book reading. She claims that book reading serves a different function that is not fulfilled by the television and therefore it is not displaced. With regard to reading in free time, she claims that research shows that there "was not much reading before television, and there is not much reading today" (p. 57). She cites NAEP 84 report which shows a steady decline in the number of students from 9 year-olds to 17 year olds who reported daily reading for leisure. This does not occur because the 1 7-year olds are devoting more time to television viewing. On the contrary, the 17-year olds spend fewer hours in daily TV viewing.

In the recent IEA international study on reading literacy, heavy TV viewing by nine year olds was found to correlate negatively with reading scores for the

following countries: the United States, Switzerland, Belgium, France and Western Germany. By contrast, there were five countries which were on average moderate viewers upto three and half hours - which were associated with higher reading performance: Finland, Italy, Norway, Portugal and Sweden (Elley, 1992). Foreign films are frequently shown on their television channels, often with subtitles in the local language, which may actually have assisted in speed reading, a finding that seems to be corroborated by Neuman and Kostinen (1992).

The research findings above show that the impact of television on literacy is not as straightforward as might be thought. Research discussed by Neuman suggests that there is little displacement of reading by television. The IEA study seems to suggest that heavy daily viewing is correlated with poorer performance in reading comprehension. However, these are not contradictory findings. The notion of displacement presupposes that there is an existing activity that can be displaced. It is quite likely the heavy viewers who did poorly in the IEA study were not readers and that TV viewing might have displaced some other activity, such as 'hanging around with friends'. In other words, reduced TV viewing for such a group would not necessarily lead to better performance in reading.

In Fiji, as mentioned previously, leisure reading is not a widespread phenomenon and therefore it is, as Neuman suggested, unlikely to replace that which does not exist. It will, however, compete with the development of leisure reading, possibly until such time as the novelty of TV wears off and the pleasure of reading becomes more manifest for more people.

Signs of change in the way writing is used in the society have also become evident. As urban areas developed and people on the island moved to these areas in search of jobs, it became necessary to write to relatives back home to keep in touch with them and to receive news and requests for monetary and other help from them. Writing of letters became a feature as a result of distances and no better evidence for this exists than the number of letters that were written to husbands and fathers who served in Lebanon as part of the UN peacekeeping forces and the expectations with which letters were awaited at home from Lebanon.

Another purpose to which writing has been used is the writing of letters to the editor of a newspaper. Geraghty (1984) reports a very lively letters-to-the-editor column in one of the Fijian newspapers and an equally lively one in the English newspapers. A randomly chosen copy of The Daily Post (24/12/94) shows this type of literate behaviour may be becoming more established. The first letter-to-the-editor in that issue complains that soldiers who had been on peace-keeping duties had still not been paid and questions the good faith of the government and its agencies. The second letter complains about the recent actions of the Trade Minister. Thirty years ago such letters would not

have been written by the 'ordinary' people. This is a new development and one that suggests that given time a wider range of literate behaviours will be seen in the society.

The urbanisation of the Fijian population and economic development will result in a wider range of purposes for which literacy will be used than was the case in the last century or in the early part of twentieth century. The demands of new informational technologies will require new literacies to be developed and these will develop out of economic imperatives. Once again the situation will be more favourable for urban dwellers, which in itself, will act as a magnet to draw more people from the smaller islands to the larger urban areas.

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